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Among the Sea Birds off the Oregon Coast, Part II

BY WILLIAM LOVELL FINLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN ^a

THE novelty of the situation had a great deal to do with alleviating the hardships and the difficulties we had to encounter in living five days among the sea birds on the vertical side of that rock isle. We had brought two ten-gallon casks of fresh water with us. We reasoned thus: if we were sea-bound on the rock by storm and had enough water to drink, we would not starve to death. According to the species of birds on the island, we made six different kinds of omelet. When the eggs were all hatched, if necessity compelled, we could dine on sea gull checks, even if they were not spiced up in good marketable chicken-tamale form.

The ledges were slippery and the rocks crumbly in many places. We could not climb along the shelves an hour without risking our lives in a dozen places. While camped on the rock, we wore rubber-soled shoes so we could hang and cling to the surface with some degree of safety. But even with these, as we hung to the ledges, we often found our toe-nails instinctively trying to drive through the soles of our shoes to get a better hold. We started with a new pair, but after four days of jumping and climbing on the sharp corners of the granite, we didn't have enough shoe left to tie on our feet, so we had to substitute burlap.

If it is the longing for adventure in the Anglo-Saxon veins you want to satisfy, you get it here on the rocks; if the love for Nature, you find her as she is. There's not much poetry on the island. The adoration of many of the nature lovers, who fall into ecstasies over the sweet singing of the birds and the lovely perfume of the June flowers, would receive an awful blow on the solar-plexus the minute they got into the midst of an ear-splitting, screaming, murre rookery, or got the faintest sniff of the atmosphere.

Up and down the ridge of the rock is the great colony of Brandt cormorants, the only "shag" found on the outer rock. Their nests are scattered only a few feet apart for over a hundred yards. I counted over 400 nests in this one colony. They were built up in funeral pyre fashion, a foot or more above the surface, by the debris of successive generations—grass and sea-weeds, fish-bones and the disgorged remains of past banquets. In every nest were four or five eggs of a skim-milk, bluish tint, over which it looked as if some amateur white-washer had smeared a chalky surface.

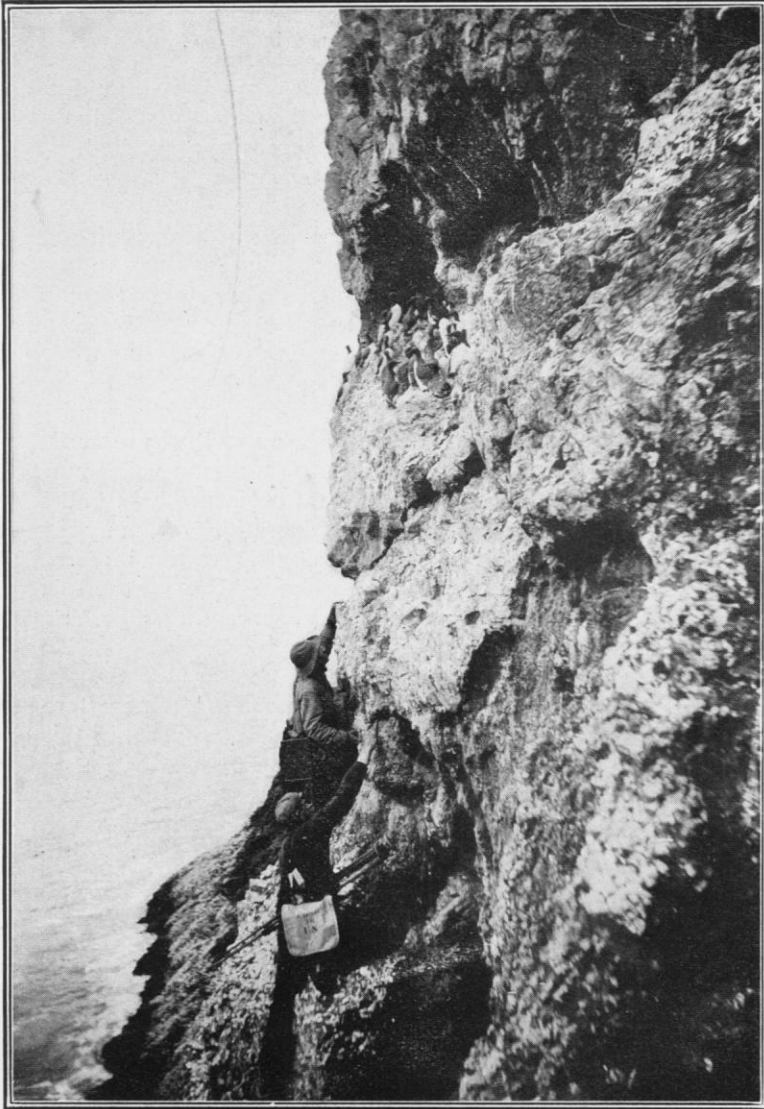
When a young cormorant is hatched, he looks as if some one had covered him with a black, greasy kid glove. The little beasts are not very pleasant to look at when you see them just coming out of the shell, but the gulls think these youngsters are the most palatable thing on the island. A nestful of them never lasts more than a few seconds if they are left unguarded.

When I first looked at the motley crowds of half-grown cormorants, that sat about in groups on the top of the rock, I thought Nature had surely done her best to make something ugly and ridiculous. They stand around with their mandibles parted and pant like a lot of dogs after the chase on a hot day. The throat is limp and flabby and hangs like an empty sack, shaken at every breath. Their bodies are propped up with a pair of legs that have a spread of webbed toes as large as a medium pan-cake. The youngsters have no very clear notion of what feet are for, at least on land, and when you go near, they go hobbling off like a boy in a sack

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race. They go teetering and tumbling along, using their short, unfledged wings as if they were a poorly handled pair of crutches.

However awkward the young cormorants are on level ground, they are experts at climbing. I put one youngster down three feet below his nest and he scrambled up an almost perpendicular bank. His sharp claws easily caught into



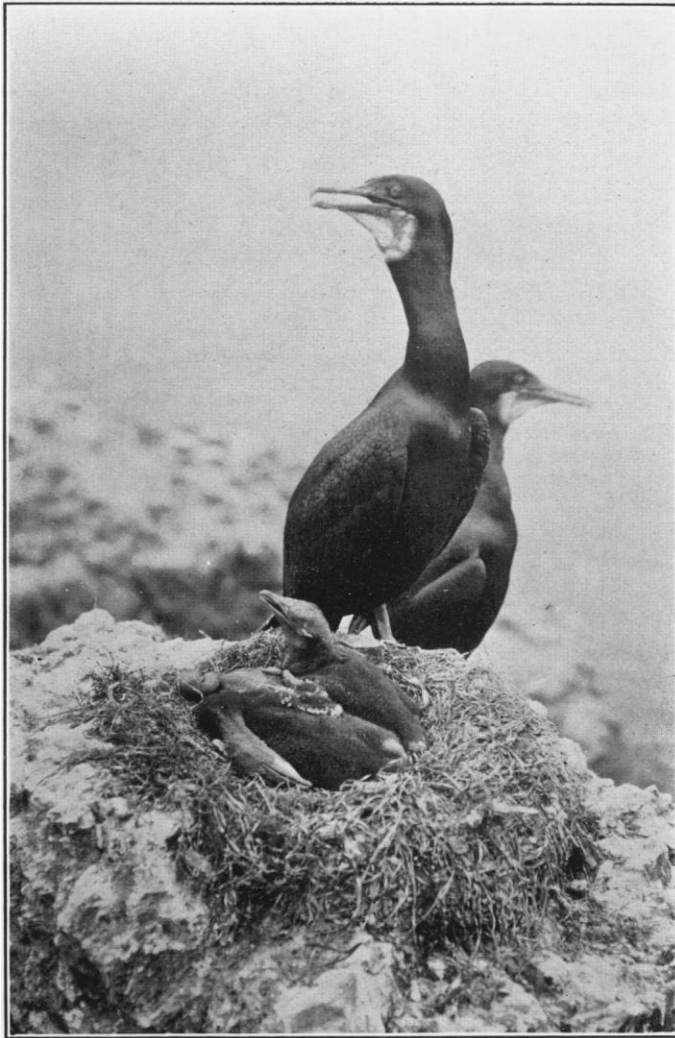
CLIMBING THE ROCKS

Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

the rough surface of the rock, and he used his undeveloped wings like hands to hang on and help him up. When he got up to the edge of the nest, he hooked his bill in parrot-fashion and clambered over the rim.

From the summit of the Outer Rock, we could look directly across several

hundred yards to the two inner rocks. The ridge of the middle rock is held almost entirely by a colony of Farallone cormorants, while the smallest shelves far up the sides of both the inner rocks are the homes of the Baird cormorant. The Farallone cormorant, it seems, is not satisfied with a grass nest, but it collects a lot of sticks, that have been worn smooth by the waves, and works them in for a foundation. The young of this species is easily distinguished from the others by its bright yellow throat-pouch.



BRANDT CORMORANTS, THREE ARCH ROCKS, OREGON

The cormorants seemed to suffer most from the raids of the gulls. The instant a gull alights near a cormorant's nest, the owner of the nest takes the defensive by spreading her wide, black wings in a protecting canopy over her eggs or young. She darts her long, hooked bill at the intruder, who calmly composes his feathers and settles down into a statuesque silence. Gradually the fears are quieted in the black mother's breast, her wings relax to their normal position, as the sup-

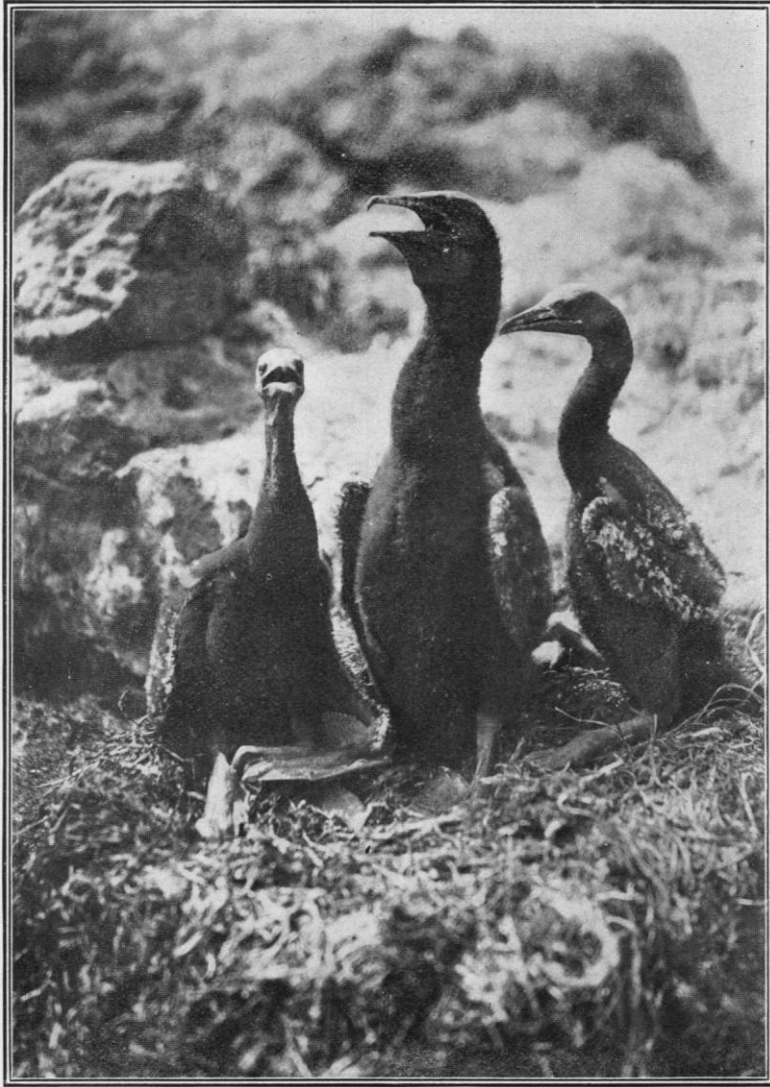
posed foe seems to be only a friendly visitor. The gull is soon forgotten, as attention is taken up with others sailing overhead. The cormorant will never leave her nest unguarded, unless frightened away by a person. The instant she does leave, is the opportunity the gull is waiting for. He walks up, cocks his head on one side and inspects the unguarded nest with the air of a connoisseur. At times, I have seen him jab through the shell and devour the contents on the spot. Again I have seen him pick up an egg, swallow it whole or make off with it in his bill. On one occasion, I saw a gull pick up a small cormorant nestling by the wing, give it a shake and start to swallow it alive. It wouldn't go down crosswise, but he grasped the kicking youngster by the head and gulped him down; the downward passage of the little fellow was marked by a bulge in the throat, till he found a temporary resting place in the crop, where he looked to me quite out of place. Twice after that, I saw gulls swallow young birds, that seemed to me as large as their own heads. I have seen a gull pick up a murre's egg, large as it is, hold it firmly in its mouth and fly away. I never saw a gull with a bill strong enough to penetrate the shell of a murre's egg, but they know enough to drop the egg to a rock below and devour the contents.

When the young cormorants are too large for the gull to eat, if he finds them unprotected, the white thief will get a meal by making the youngsters disgorge. Often when you approach a squad of young cormorants or a nest full of gulls, they will begin vomiting in all directions and then take to their heels, as if they knew exactly what you wanted.

One day we were climbing along the ledges with our cameras, when a commotion above attracted our attention. A gull was furiously darting downward with an angry scream, evidently in battle with some other bird. The opponent was too far above to be in sight, but at each swoop of the gull, we could see they were drawing nearer the brink. A moment later, we saw a half-grown cormorant scrambling and flapping wildly to hold on the steep crumbly surface. At the next swoop, the gull clipped him on the neck and the momentum swept him over. The victim was heavier in body than the gull, but undeveloped and helpless on the wing. Down he flopped with a rumble and rattle of shale, bumping on the ragged rocks of the different ledges, catching an instant in a niche only to be knocked off by his remorseful pursuer. I saw him land a hundred feet below with a crash, square in the middle of a crowded ledge of murre. There was the commotion of an explosion in that peaceful community; such a grunting and squawking as a hundred pair of wings swept out over the sea. The poor cormorant, battered and bruised, was still alive. Before he had time to collect his senses, the flight of disturbed murre came rushing back. The gull was forced to abandon his victim, who had dropped plump into a veritable hornet's nest. The unfortunate black youngster was stung right and left, fore and aft, by the sharp bill-thrusts of the mad murre. He ambled out of there with about as much vigor as he landed, and limped to the top of a boulder, where he was left in peace. We found him still there in the afternoon, too sore and scared to move. As he sat there blinking and shuddering, it seemed to penetrate his inexperienced brain, that he had met with one of the hardest streaks of luck that anything in feathers had struck. Our sympathy went out to him and I bundled him under my arm and carried him back to the top of the rock, where I laid him down in a nest with five more that looked exactly like him.

It is a common occurrence for young birds to fall over the ledges of the cliff, where the population is so crowded. Late one afternoon, while preparing our

usual meal, we were suddenly startled by an avalanche of loose gravel and rubbish rattling down the side of the cliff. We jumped for the cover of the projecting ledge, just as a large cormorant came flopping down and with a sickening thud landed in a heap at our door step. He must have come from one of these nests that were seventy-five feet above us. Such a fall would have broken every bone



YOUNG BRANDT CORMORANTS

Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

in the body of an ordinary creature. The youngster got up a little dazed, twisted his neck in a few grotesque curves as if he were just waking up. Then he deliberately climbed over our pots and pans onto the end of our dining table, crept right close beside our fire, drew in his long neck and went sound asleep.

I have been amazed at the fearful falls some of the young murrens and cormor-

ants receive with little, if any apparent injury. Their bodies seem to be built rubber-boned and rubber-jointed with a base-ball skin to stand such battering. It is not so with the young gulls. A fall half the distance seems to kill them instantly. The morning after the young cormorant dropped so unceremoniously among our dishes, I found two lifeless gulls on the ledge a short piece below our camp; they had undoubtedly dropped from some of the nests not more than thirty or forty feet above.

When we pitched our camp below the two murre rookeries, we knew they would squawk all day long, but we had no idea but that they would go to sleep when it got dark. We crawled in at nine o'clock that night to get some sleep. Just as we got well under way, two mures lit at the landing point of the rookery just over my head. Many of these birds had a habit of coming home late. Instead of moving on, the two got into some kind of an altercation on the spot. They wouldn't fight it out like a pair of good tom-cats, but for a good lively discussion, it outdid anything I have ever heard in a back-yard. I have slept in the midst of a heron rookery and never awoke amid the continuous clacking of the night herons. You can do it if there is a sort of regularity in the monotony of the chirps. But this was out of all proportion. I yelled and shooed for five minutes, but was not heard. I reached under my blanket, raked out a rock, crawled over and hurled it at the serenaders. The mures left, but they bore no grudge against me. Before I got covered up, they were back again and started in from the beginning. We simply had to wait till the quarrel ran its course. No matter what time we got to sleep, we were always roused at four in the morning and had to crawl out with the bird population and get breakfast. Every morning about that time, the mures would drop off the rock in squads and swim off southward to their fishing grounds.

The peculiar top-shape of the murre's egg is a unique device to prevent it from rolling. The practical value of this can be seen every day on the sloping ledges. We tried several experiments with these eggs and found they were of such taper, that not one rolled over the edge. When they were started down grade, they did not roll straight, but swung around like a top and came to a stand-still four or five inches down. The eggs were tough shelled and a sharp push only sent one about nine inches before it whirled around on its own vertical axis.

A young murre seems to hatch with a little more vigor than an ordinary chick; he has to have strength in order to kick himself out of such a tough shell. When he first sees daylight, he is uniformly dusky in color, but he rapidly takes on a white shirt-front. When he is half grown, the white extends to the throat and the sides of the head. The old birds, on the contrary, have no white whatever on the throat and head.

On land, the mures are about as awkward as anything that ever grew a pair of wings. They have to flap and waddle along, bumping here and there, till they get a good start, before they can clear the ground. It is amusing to watch one sweep in from the fishing ground and land on the rock. When about twenty feet away, he begins to slack speed, then he spreads his legs and back-paddles, as awkward as a man, who has just slipped on a banana peel, and he strikes sprawled out in much the same shape that the man does.

Late one afternoon, we were sitting in camp with our feet dangling over the edge of the back porch, when our attention was caught by a gull that sailed out from the side of the rock about a hundred feet up. In his mouth, he held a screaming young murre. High above the rock-reef, he let him drop. Instead of the

youngster striking on the rock and being killed as the gull expected, he landed at the water's edge with a splash. He came up paddling and started oceanward, crying for help. He hadn't gone but a few yards when I saw the gull swoop and catch the squealing youngster again. He flew over to the reef, shaking the little fellow as a terror does a rat, and would have made short work of him, had we not hurled two boulders at the murderer and stopped him in the very act. The little murre crawled up into a crevice. We examined him, but found no injury but a little blood on a wing.



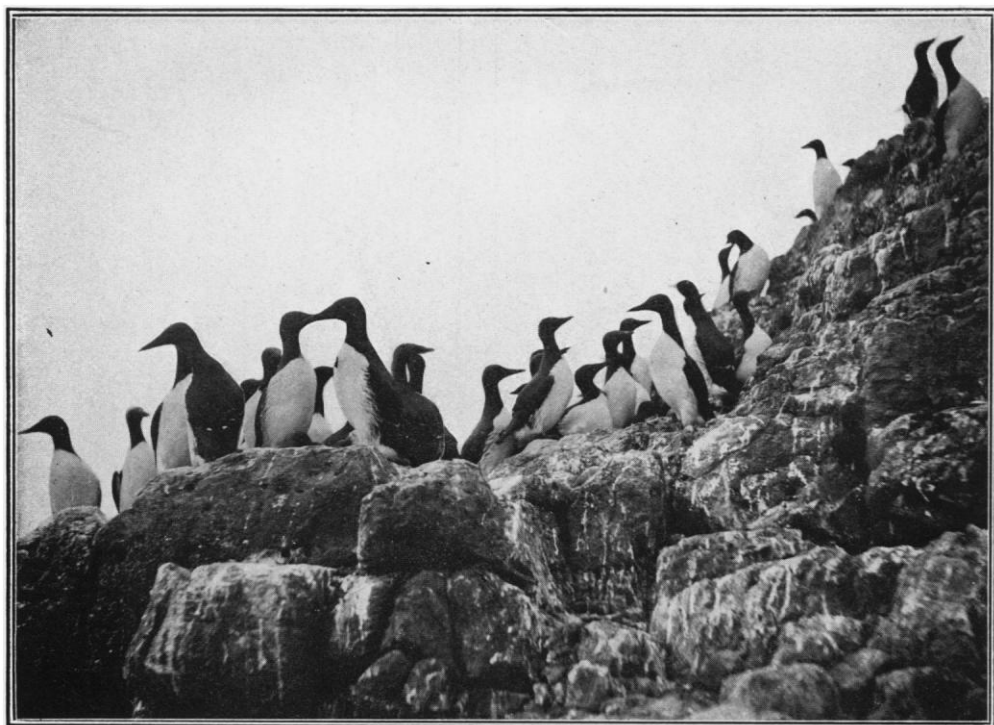
CALIFORNIA MURRE AND YOUNG

To watch a murre colony for a while, one would wonder why they persist in crowding so close together. Neighbors always seemed to be quarreling, hacking or jawing at each other. They are rarely hit because they all know how to dodge well. I have often seen a murre take out her spite on her neighbor's children. I was sitting a few feet away watching some murrens. There were two matrons, each with a baby at her breast. The youngster of one mother seemed to have

gotten a little too near the other old lady, for she dealt him a rap on the side of the head that made him crouch back in a hurry. Instead of the chick's mother avenging by striking back at her neighbor, she suddenly reached over and took her neighbor's chick two sharp clips on the head. The old birds didn't strike at each other once, but several times the chicks got the benefit of the quarrel, until they dodged out of the way.

As you look over a large series of murre eggs, you see a perfect spring flower-garden of tints. You might wonder who the artist was who designed a thousand of them and got no two alike. Scientists have said that this variation in size, shape and color may be of use in helping the murre's to recognize their own eggs.

I questioned whether it was within a murre's limited intelligence to know her



A SECTION OF THE MURRE ROOKERY

Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

own egg or chick, when there were several hundred others scattered about on all sides. I thought all she wanted was a part in the big nest group, and that she returned each time and planted herself on the first egg she found, and, like any old barn-yard fowl, didn't care a feather whether she or her neighbor laid it. But this is not so.

We lay stretched out on our stomachs on the ledge just above the big rookery, where we could watch the ordinary run of life and not disturb the birds in any way. When a murre arrived from the fishing grounds, he lit on the outer edge of the table, where he looked about after two or three elaborate bows. Then, like a man in a fourth of July crowd, he looked for an opening in the dense front ranks. Seeing none, he boldly squeezed in, pushing and shoving to right and

left. The neighbors resented such behavior and pecked at the new arrival with their long, sharp bills, but on he pressed amid much opposition and complaint, until he reached his wife. They changed places, and he took up his vigil on the eggs. The wife, upon leaving the rookery, instead of taking flight from where she stood, went through the former proceeding, although in reverse order, much to the disgust of the neighbors. They made a vigorous protest, and sped the departing sister with a fusillade of blows, until she arrived at the edge of the ledge, where she dropped off into space. Others were coming and going and kept up an interesting performance for the onlooker from above.

Then we went down and scared all the birds from the ledge and watched them return. Almost before we got back into position, the first one pitched awkwardly in and lit on the edge. She sat for a little bit clucking and craning her neck. Then she hobbled up the rock past two eggs, bowing and looking around. On she went in her straddling gait, stopping and cocking her head on one side till I saw her pass eight or nine eggs. Finally she poked an egg gently with her bill, looked it over and tucked it under her leg. By that time, the ledge was half full of birds, all cackling, pecking at each other, and shuffling about looking among the eggs. It took almost half an hour for life in the colony to drop back to its normal stage.

Two years later, when we sat and watched the some large rookery, there was hardly an egg to be seen. Where it was a little noisy during the days of incubation, it was the triple extract of bedlam turned loose when the murre had young. We tried the same experiment of scaring the birds from the ledge and watched their return. The young kept up a constant squealing from the time the old birds left; a noise that had the penetration of an equal number of young pigs that had just been roped and gunney-sacked. When the first old hen returned and lit on the edge, she bowed elaborately and started calling in cries that sounded, at times, just like the bass voice of a man and varied all the way up to the cackling of an old chicken. After sitting there for five minutes, she straddled up a few steps and started in from the beginning again. Some of the young came waddling down to meet their parents, calling all the time in piercing screams. One crawled hurriedly down to get under the old murre's wing, but she gave him a jab that knocked him clear off his feet, and sent him looking for his real mamma. She looked at two more that sat squealing, but passed them by and knocked another one sprawling out of her way. At last, a chick came up that seemed to qualify, for she let him crawl under her wing. The same thing seemed to be going on in every part of the ledge; I didn't see an old bird that accepted a chick until after calling and looking around for from five to twenty minutes. If the difference in size, shape, and color helps the murre to recognize her own egg, then the great variation in pitch, volume, and tone of the voice surely helps her to know her own child among so many others.

Portland, Oregon.